

THE KEY TO PRAYER

Scripture Reading: Matt. 7:8; Isa. 62:6-7

Prayer is a matter of great importance in the spiritual life of a Christian. Every true Christian realizes this and prays. However, even though some of the Lord's children spend time praying over many matters, they do not seem to get through in prayer. It seems as if they have not found the way to pray. This is because they have not discovered the key.

In whatever we do, we must first have the key, the secret. If we want to enter a room and the door is locked, we will not find the way in unless we possess the key. Suppose we need two people to carry a table through a door. Some may do it without a problem; but others may do it awkwardly, bumping and banging it in a vain effort to get it through the door. The size of the table and the width of the door is the same; the only difference is with the people who are carrying the table. Some have the key to carrying the table, while others do not. People who have found the key do things well; they are able workers. Once a person gets the key, he can do things twice as fast as others do, while those who do not have the key labor in vain. The same principle applies to prayer. Matthew 7 speaks of principles relating to prayer, one of which is, "He who seeks finds" (v. 8). Seeking requires effort. Anyone who looks in a half-hearted, leisurely manner will probably not find anything. Seeking involves patience and perseverance, and unless we are thorough, we will not find what we seek. If God does not answer our prayers, we must exercise patience and diligently seek the key to prayer. God answered the prayers of many of the saints in the past because they had the key to prayer. By reading the biography of George Müller, the one who founded a number of orphanages, we can see that he was a man of prayer; throughout his entire life, he was always receiving answers to prayer. George Müller had discovered the key. Many earnest Christians pray at great length; they pray wordy prayers, but they do

not receive answers from God. In prayer, words are essential, but our words must be to the point; they should be words that touch the heart of God and move Him so that He has no alternative but to grant our requests. Words that are to the point are the key to prayer. These kinds of words match God's will, and He cannot but respond to them. Let us find the key to prayer from a few scriptural illustrations.

ABRAHAM'S PRAYER FOR SODOM (GENESIS 18:16-33)

When God made known to Abraham that He was about to execute judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness, Abraham waited before God. Then he began to pray for Sodom. He did not just open his mouth and say, "O God, have mercy on Sodom and Gomorrah!" He did not beseech God with great intensity, saying, "Oh, forbid that Sodom and Gomorrah should be destroyed!" Abraham laid hold of the fact that God is a righteous God (Gen. 18:25); this was the key to his prayer. In deep humility and with great earnestness, he proceeded to ask God one question after another. His questions were his prayers. As he proceeded in prayer, he stood steadfastly on the ground of God's righteousness. At length he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there" (v. 32). Following this he did not ask or make any more requests. After God answered, we are told that "the Lord went his way" (v. 33). Abraham did not try to hold on to God; he did not try to go on praying. He returned to his place. Some people may think that Abraham should have continued beseeching God and that he should not have stopped with just ten people. However, the Scriptures show that Abraham knew God, and he knew the key to prayer. He heard the Lord say, "The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and...their sin is very grievous...the

cry of it...is come unto me" (vv. 20-21). If there were not even ten righteous people in a city, what kind of a city was it? The Lord loves righteousness and hates lawlessness (Heb. 1:9). He cannot cover sin and refrain from judgment. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was the awful consequence of their sin, and it was the manifestation of God's righteousness. When He overthrew those cities, He did no injustice to a single righteous person; He "rescued righteous Lot, who had been oppressed by the licentious manner of life of the lawless" (2 Pet. 2:7). Abraham's prayer was to the point, and it was answered. There was no unrighteousness with God. He did not "slay the righteous with the wicked" (Gen. 18:25). We worship and we praise Him.

JOSHUA'S INQUIRY ABOUT THE FAILURE AT AI (JOSHUA 7)

When the children of Israel attacked the city of Ai, "they fled before the men of Ai. And the men of Ai struck some of them, about thirty-six men; and they pursued them from before the gate unto Shebarim and struck them on the slope. And the heart of the people melted and became like water" (Josh. 7:4-5). After such a mighty triumph at Jericho, why did the children of Israel suffer such a dire defeat at Ai? The only thing that Joshua could do was to prostrate himself before God, seek after God, wait on Him, and inquire into the cause of the defeat. Joshua was grieved on account of the danger that Israel had fallen into, but he was grieved more by the dishonor that was brought to the name of the Lord; therefore, he inquired, "What will You do for Your great name?" This was the key to his prayer. He honored the name of God. His concern was for what God would do for the sake of His own name! When Joshua came to this point, God spoke. He said, "Israel has sinned....Thus the children of Israel are not able to stand before their enemies....I will not be with you anymore, unless you destroy that which was devoted to destruction from among you" (vv. 11-12). God was concerned

for His own name and could not tolerate sin among His people. He heard Joshua's prayer and instructed him to discover and do away with the sin that had caused the trouble. After Joshua was clear about the reason for Israel's defeat, he rose up early in the morning to deal with the matter and discovered that the trouble was Achan's sin of covetousness. When Israel had dealt with this sin, their defeat was turned into victory. To tolerate and hide one's sin is to cause God's name to be blasphemed and to give Satan occasion to attack God's people. Joshua did not just open his mouth in undiscerning zeal and plead with God to save His people and make them victorious once again. The dishonor that was brought upon God's great name grieved him, and his plea reminded God to take up the matter for His own name's sake. His prayer was to the point, and it brought an answer from God. Joshua had to first find the reason for failure. He had to discover the sin and deal with it before glory could be given to Jehovah the God of Israel.

DAVID'S INQUIRY ABOUT THE THREE-YEAR FAMINE (2 SAMUEL 21:1-9, 14)

"Then there was a famine in the days of David three years, year after year; and David inquired of the Lord" (v. 1). David did not simply open his lips and pray, "O God, this famine has lasted three years; we beseech Thee to have mercy on us. Take this famine away from us and grant us a rich harvest this year." No, David did not pray in that way. "David inquired of the Lord." He sought to find the cause of the famine. David's inquiry was to the point; he touched the key. God said, "It is for Saul, and for his bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites" (v. 1). God will not tolerate the sin of breaking a vow, and David had to deal with this sin. After he dealt with this, the Word of God records that "God was entreated for the land" (v. 14). David possessed the key to prayer; his prayer was to the point, and his prayer brought God's answer.

THE PRAYERS OF THE LORD JESUS (JOHN 12:27-28; MATTHEW 26:39-46)

The prayers of our Lord were always perfect, and they always touched the key to prayer. When He refused to see the Greeks who sought Him, He said, "Now is My soul troubled; and what shall I say?" (John 12:27). He turned the matter over carefully and thought, "What shall I say? Father, save Me out of this hour." No, He knew He could not pray in that way. He realized, "For this reason I have come to this hour" (v. 27); therefore, He prayed, "Father, glorify Your name." This prayer was answered immediately. "Then a voice came out of heaven: I have both glorified it and will glorify it again" (v. 28). If this is the way the Son of God, as the Son of Man, prayed to God on the earth, how dare we on the impulse of the moment open our lips and utter rash prayers! It is essential that we learn the key to prayer.

That night in the garden of Gethsemane our Lord Jesus was exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. How did He pray under those circumstances? "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will" (Matt. 26:39). He possessed the key to prayer. He had no fear of death, and He was not without His own will. But He did not choose to take His own will; He wanted to take the Father's will. So He prayed a second time, "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done" (v. 42). He prayed a third time, "saying the same word again" (v. 44). When He was utterly clear concerning the Father's will, He said to His disciples, "The hour has drawn near....Arise, let us be going" (v. 45-46). If our Lord as a man on the earth mastered the key to prayer and set Himself aside in order to seek after God's will, how dare we randomly utter a few words in prayer and conclude we have discerned God's will!

THE PRAYER OF THE CANAANITE WOMAN (MATTHEW 15:22-28; MARK 7:24-30)

When the Canaanite woman was in distress, she cried out in her need, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!" (Matt. 15:22). Was she earnest in prayer? Truly she was. But it is amazing that the Lord "did not answer her a word" (v. 23). The disciples seemed to be in sympathy with her because they said on her behalf, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us" (v. 23). But what did the Lord reply to them? He said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (v. 24). The Lord's reply gave the woman the key to approach Him. She saw that the Son of David was related only to the house of Israel, not to the nations. So she came and worshipped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" (v. 25). She called Him "Lord," not "Son of David." She realized that only the house of Israel had the right to use that title, so she forsook the wrong ground on which she had been standing and addressed her prayer to Him as Lord. This prayer brought His answer: "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs" (v. 26). The answer seemed so cold that it sounded as though the Lord was rejecting and embarrassing the woman. Actually, He was trying to show her where she stood so that she might know the meaning of grace. The woman saw her own place; she saw the Lord as well as His grace, and seizing the key to prayer, she said, "Yes, Lord, for even the little dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table" (v. 27). This called forth the Lord's commendation, and He said to her, "O woman, great is your faith!" (v. 28). She had found the key to prayer, and spontaneously she had faith. In Mark 7 the Lord said, "Because of this word, go. The demon has gone out of your daughter" (v. 29). Her prayer was answered "because of this word." Her word touched the key to prayer. This is what we need to learn. Often we pray, yet our prayer seems to disappear like a stone dropped into the ocean; it goes away without any answer from God. We have not

found the right key to unlock the door; however, we do not try to discover the reason that God has not answered our prayer. Brothers and sisters, how can we expect God to answer such foolish prayers? In all of our prayers we must first find the key; only as we do this can we expect to have constant answers from God.

Having looked at these illustrations related to prayer, bear in mind that as we pray we should heed the inner voice and not be governed by our circumstances, thoughts, or affections. When that still small voice within tells us to pray, when in the depths of our being we have a sense that we should pray, then we should pray at once. Circumstances should only be a means of driving us into the presence of God to wait on Him; they should not be our master, and we should not be hindered by them from praying. Our mind should only serve to organize our inner feelings, which should be then expressed in words; our mind should not be the source of prayer. Prayer is the expression of the inner feelings through the mind; it does not originate in the mind. Prayer according to the will of God is only possible when we are in harmony with His will; it is not an exercise of forcing God to oblige man's emotions. Unless our emotions are dealt with, it is impossible for us to pray; prayers will not have a way to be released. Once we are under the control of our emotions, we will pray in a natural way according to our subjective desires; it will be hard to pray according to the inner leading. Therefore, we must touch the key to prayer. Whenever we find ourselves praying ineffectively, fruitlessly, and insufficiently, we must ask the Lord for light and seek to discover the cause. As we inquire of the Lord, we will reach a point at which we feel that we have gotten through, when something within clicks, and a still small voice within says, "That's it!" We have found the key to prayer. As we use the key and pray on, we can be assured that God will answer our prayer.

Isaiah 62:6 says,

Upon your walls, O Jerusalem,
I have appointed watchmen;
All day and all night
They will never keep silent.

These watchmen are men of prayer. They have to be on watch tirelessly in order to know if something is happening and cry out when it does. A man of prayer must be one who reminds the Lord continually. This is not the work of one individual or a few men; there is the need for a group of men to pray this way. "All day and all night they will never keep silent." These are companies watching together, and together they discover something, and together they pray unceasingly to God. Their prayers do not cease "until He establishes and until He makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth" (v. 7). We must persevere in prayer until the Body of Christ is built up. God needs our prayers. He wants us to have a spirit of prayer, the atmosphere of prayer, and the key to prayer. Brothers and sisters, let us arise and learn to pray. Let us seek the key to prayer so that we may meet God's need today.